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Stranglehold

PHIL McCOMBS,
a reporter for the
Style section of
The Post, was
chief of The Post's
Saigon bureau in
April 1975.

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AIGON: On the last day I was there, April 29, 1975, the North Vietnamese Army shelled Tansonnhat airport before dawn. Hit it with 300 rounds from 130 mm guns located miles away and ripped up the runway so that the American evacuation that began later in the day had to be by chopper. During the shelling the whole city shook and reporters went to the roof of the old Continental Palace Hotel to watch. They saw great billowing fireballs and one said he saw a Strela heat-seeking missile shoot up and disintegrate an airplane. I slept through the whole thing.

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At dusk on the 29th, as frantic Vietnamese clawed at the embassy gates, Greenway said quietly, "It's time to go." It had never occurred to me to hang around for the "liberation" and anyway Bradlee had ordered us out. Oberdorfer had gone out a few days earlier to report from the American evacuation fleet off the coast in the South China Sea. Staying alive in Vietnam had always been a matter of playing the odds, and if Greenway, whose instincts were perfectly pitched, said it was time to go, then it was. The big Marine choppers landing in the embassy parking lot seemed few and far between, the crowds outside the gates were growing uglier and night was falling. CIA station chief Tom Polgar was wondering aloud why the North Vietnamese hadn't turned their 130 mm guns on the embassy.

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... The agonized realization has dawned on my friend that in a short time, possibly in weeks, the Vietcong flag

may be flying over Saigon." I remember how we were alone in my apartment with the sun streaming in, how he said maybe he would get a small boat and how the thought made him break down—his precious wife and children adrift on the sea! Later this man and his family got out on the secret airlift and now live in Washington.

Saigon's collapse seemed inevitable by April 2. The government had only seven divisions left and 19 NVA divisions—a quarter of a million well-armed troops—were rolling south. Gen. Frederick C. Weyand visited Saigon to report to President Ford and he brought along a top CIA guy who told a wonderful story at dinner: Back in the '50s he had been the Saigon station chief and one night he and some friends went tiger hunting out near Tayninh. As they walked under the moon near a dark and crumbling villa, they were suddenly transfixed by a spotlight from its balcony. It was the Vietminh and this CIA guy remembered in that instant thinking: *I can roll and fire but the others will be killed, or we can try to bluff it out.* Somehow they talked their way out.

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